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Commentary... In The Hunger of Memory

By DAVID MITTELL JR.

Insofar as I am aware the Freeman-Reed-Hecks House -- late of 47 Standish St. -- was unique in Duxbury. Its classically-ordered porch, long first story windows and single-light front door with bordering sidelights clearly place it in the Greek Revival style inspired by Thomas Jefferson. It probably was built about 1840.

But unlike other Greek Revival farmhouses found nearby and throughout the town, the detail evoking a Greek temple was here applied to the broad side of the house, which faced the street, rather than to the gable end. By contrast, the typical example of the common Greek Revival is the former Levi Cushing house on the other side of Standish St. Here the gable end, with modest but loving Greek Revival treatment, faces the street.

Every ancestor took some of his reasons to the grave, but one reason the "temple" was sometimes turned sideways to the street in exception to the common practice was when 18th century houses -- which were commonly built broad side to the street, were dressed up in Greek Revival detail. The close resemblance of the Hecks house to John and Lynn Sinclair's 1770 house at 279 Standish St. may indicate that the little gem that now exists only in the hunger of memory was in fact built before 1776 in another country.

In the 20th century the house was a visual clue that symbolized the best of what Duxbury is: beautiful and refined but presenting itself with a becoming modesty. Moreover, for one who has traveled Standish St. for all of his 53 years, it also symbolized the town's quiet stability in a loud and falsely valued age. Unto the mid-1950's Mrs. Hecks' father, Waldo Reed, would lead a single cow by leash six-tenths of a mile down Standish St. to my grandparents' driveway, where he would come in and let his companion graze in one of the last unreforested fields of the old Brewer Farm.

For all of these years unto 1996 there were luxuriant potted plants in the 2-floor-reaching Greek Revival front windows. These plants -- the very same -- were a wedding present to Waldo and Sarah Reed in the early part of this century. There they remained, lovingly nurtured *in situ* by their daughter, Mrs. Hecks, throughout her own marriage.

She sold the house reluctantly and without being told what its fate would be. We can imagine how she feels at this hour. The first duty of her friends is to express our sorrow for her loss. Then it is our duty to contemplate the public policy issues involved.

In this writer's opinion the way this was handled was loathsome, but the new property owner had every right under current law to be insensitive in this matter. There is no point in personal recriminations. But we should notice that the canary has died!

Duxbury Clipper, Wednesday, August 14, 1996

The Hecks house was a unique but relatively speaking minor visual clue to what has made Duxbury Duxbury over the centuries. As a "canary" it represented modesty,

good taste, neighborliness, beauty. By failing to give this canary any protection whatever, public policy has put it down the shaft of a mine with many sulphurous chambers. The greatest of these is money greed

(something that does not seem to have been involved in the destruction of the Hecks house).

For there are developers who regard Duxbury the way an elm bark beetle regards a healthy elm -- to be devoured. Could a developer destroy the magnificent Tweed-Leonard house on Washington St. at Mattakeeset Court in favor of some postmodern monstrosity? Under present law he could. Would he? You bet he would. This town is hot property and will be into the indefinite future. There are going to be those who will understand Duxbury only as fungible real estate, who care nothing for the town or her people.

It is a pity that the 47 Standish St. canary suffocated down there. But the future and perhaps even Mrs. Hecks' great present feeling of loss can be in part redeemed if we will now act to prevent recurrences. The correct call is for a bylaw delaying demolitions of historic properties. Such provisions in other communities usually entail a delay of 6 months. Given the number of rare and sometimes still unrecognized masterworks in Duxbury, I don't think a delay extensible to 2 years and applicable to any dwelling standing for 1,200 months -- that's one century -- would be excessive.

Such a law would not ultimately deprive the property owner of his rights. But it buys time in which to educate him and to offer him other options. Among developers the "elm bark beetle" is thankfully the exception. I think we can hope that with some time on our side we can effect more happy outcomes such as the last-minute rescue of Manion Hall -- done it should be noted by a builder.

A final point to ponder... It is said that Mrs. Hecks' sale of her family homestead was not entirely voluntary, a fact that if it be so raises the spectre of the town's increasing unaffordability for her elderly, for her public servants, for her sons and daughters setting out to start a family. The question of affordable housing is another canary that needs more air.